

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

JOSE GUEVARA,

Plaintiff,

-against-

JOHN DOE; JOHN DOE; JANE DOE; N.Y.
CITY DOCS RIKERS ISLAND,

Defendant(s).

21-CV-9760 (LTS)

ORDER TO AMEND

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff, who is currently incarcerated in the North Infirmary Command on Rikers Island, brings this *pro se* action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, alleging that corrections officials violated his constitutional rights. By order dated November 23, 2021, the Court granted Plaintiff's request to proceed without prepayment of fees, that is, *in forma pauperis* (IFP).¹ For the reasons set forth below, the Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint within 60 days of the date of this order.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Prison Litigation Reform Act requires that federal courts screen complaints brought by prisoners who seek relief against a governmental entity or an officer or employee of a governmental entity. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a). The Court must dismiss a prisoner's IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B), 1915A(b); *see Abbas v. Dixon*, 480 F.3d 636, 639

¹ Prisoners are not exempt from paying the full filing fee even when they have been granted permission to proceed IFP. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1).

(2d Cir. 2007). The Court must also dismiss a complaint if the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

While the law mandates dismissal on any of these grounds, the court is obliged to construe *pro se* pleadings liberally, *Harris v. Mills*, 572 F.3d 66, 72 (2d Cir. 2009), and interpret them to raise the “strongest [claims] that they suggest,” *Triestman v. Fed. Bureau of Prisons*, 470 F.3d 471, 474 (2d Cir. 2006) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis in original). But the “special solicitude” in *pro se* cases, *id.* at 475 (citation omitted), has its limits – to state a claim, *pro se* pleadings still must comply with Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which requires a complaint to make a short and plain statement showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.

The Supreme Court has held that, under Rule 8, a complaint must include enough facts to state a claim for relief “that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). A claim is facially plausible if the plaintiff pleads enough factual detail to allow the court to draw the inference that the defendant is liable for the alleged misconduct. In reviewing the complaint, the court must accept all well-pleaded factual allegations as true. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009). But it does not have to accept as true “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action,” which are essentially just legal conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. After separating legal conclusions from well-pleaded factual allegations, the court must determine whether those facts make it plausible – not merely possible – that the pleader is entitled to relief. *Id.*

BACKGROUND

The complaint sets forth the following facts. On October 1, 2021, Plaintiff was transported by bus from Downstate Correctional Facility to Rikers Island. When Plaintiff got off the bus, he realized that his property bag was missing. (ECF 2 ¶ V.) Plaintiff told the three

correction officers who were present that his property bag was missing, and that it contained law books and legal research that he needed for an upcoming trial as well as “Christian” and “spiritual” books. (*Id.*) The officers “got on the radio or cell phone” and then told Plaintiff that officials at Downstate would send Plaintiff’s property to him, but to date he still has not received it. (*Id.*) Plaintiff was in the Contagious Disease Unit for more than three weeks, and during that time no one would discuss his property with him, and he was unable to “see grievance.” (*Id.*) Plaintiff seeks money damages. (*Id.* ¶ VI.)

DISCUSSION

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege both that: (1) a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States was violated, and (2) the right was violated by a person acting under the color of state law, or a “state actor.” *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48-49 (1988).

A. First Amendment Claims

1. Access-to-Courts

The Court construes Plaintiff’s allegations regarding the loss of his legal materials as asserting that Defendants violated his First Amendment right of access to the courts. To state a claim for denial of access to the courts, a plaintiff must allege facts showing that the defendants’ conduct (1) “was deliberate and malicious,” and (2) “resulted in actual injury to the plaintiff such as the dismissal of an otherwise meritorious legal claim.” *Davis v. Goord*, 320 F.3d 346, 351 (2d Cir. 2003) (internal quotation marks omitted); *see also Christopher v. Harbury*, 536 U.S. 403, 415 (2002); *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343, 350-53 (1996). To demonstrate actual injury, a plaintiff must allege: (1) a valid underlying cause of action separate from the right-of-access claim; and (2) frustration or hindrance of the litigation caused by the defendant’s actions. *See Harbury*, 546 U.S. at 415.

Plaintiff's allegations that he needs his legal materials for an upcoming trial fail to state a claim that he was denied a constitutional right of access to the court. Plaintiff does not plead that Defendants' conduct prevented him from litigating a meritorious claim or resulted in any actual injury.² The Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint to provide facts supporting this claim.

2. Free Exercise

Under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, the government may not "substantial[ly] burden" a prisoner's religious exercise unless the burden furthers a compelling governmental interest by the least restrictive means. *Jova v. Smith*, 582 F.3d 410, 415 (2d Cir. 2009). RLUIPA provides that "[n]o government shall impose a substantial burden on the religious exercise of a person residing in or confined to an institution . . . even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, unless the government demonstrates that imposition of the burden on that person—(1) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest." 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc-1(a).³

² Where a defendant is provided with appointed counsel, an access-to-the-courts claim does not arise. *See Bourdon v. Loughren*, 386 F.3d 88, 94 (2d Cir. 2004) ("[W]e explicitly hold that the appointment of counsel can be a valid means of fully satisfying a state's constitutional obligation to provide prisoners, including pretrial detainees, with access to the courts in conformity with the requirements of the [Constitution]."); *see also Spates v. Manson*, 644 F.2d 80, 85 (2d Cir. 1981) (holding that "where state-financed legal assistance is available" a prisoner does not have "a right to state-financed library resources"); *Hayes v. Cnty. of Sullivan*, 853 F. Supp.2d 400, 436 (S.D.N.Y. 2012); *Benjamin v. Kerik*, 102 F. Supp.2d 157, 163-64 (S.D.N.Y. 2000) ("The Second Circuit has held that the right of access to courts is not infringed where prisoners are not supplied with an adequate prison library, so long as they were provided with appointed counsel."). Should Plaintiff file an amended complaint, he should clarify whether he is represented by counsel in the pending matter.

³ RLUIPA does not provide for monetary damages against state officials sued in their official capacity, *Sossamon v. Texas*, 563 U.S. 277 (2011), or in their individual capacities. *Washington v. Gonyea*, 731 F.3d 143 (2d Cir. 2013) (per curiam).

Plaintiff's allegations that Defendants lost his Christian and spiritual books do not clearly suggest significant interference with Plaintiff's right to exercise his religious beliefs. Should Plaintiff amend his complaint, he should provide facts that support this claim.

B. Property claim

A claim for deprivation of property is not recognized in federal court if the state courts provide a remedy for the deprivation of that property. *See Hudson v. Palmer*, 468 U.S. 517, 533 (1984); *Marino v. Ameruso*, 837 F.2d 45, 47 (2d Cir. 1988) (citations omitted). "[T]he availability of an action in the Court of Claims provides [an] adequate post-deprivation remedy for prisoners who claim deprivation of personal property by prison officials." *Jones v. Harris*, 665 F. Supp. 2d 384, 401 (S.D.N.Y. 2009) (describing procedure available to state prisoners). Thus, "even the intentional destruction of an inmate's property by a prison officer does not violate the Due Process Clause if the state provides that inmate with an adequate post-deprivation remedy." *Little v. Mun. Corp.*, 51 F. Supp. 3d 473, 499 (S.D.N.Y. 2014) (New York state law provides pretrial detainees with an adequate post-deprivation remedy, that is, § 9 of the Court of Claims Act).

To the extent Plaintiff seeks damages for the loss of property, he fails to allege facts demonstrating that his available state remedies are in any way inadequate or inappropriate. *See Butler v. Castro*, 896 F.2d 698, 700-04 (2d Cir. 1990). Plaintiff's claim concerning the loss of his property is therefore dismissed for failure to state a claim. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

C. Claims against the named defendants

1. New York City Department of Correction/Rikers Island

Plaintiff's claims against the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) and Rikers Island must be dismissed because an agency of the City of New York is not an entity that can be sued. N.Y. City Charter ch. 17, § 396 ("[A]ll actions and proceedings for the recovery of penalties for the violation of any law shall be brought in the name of the city of New York and

not in that of any agency, except where otherwise provided by law.”); *Jenkins v. City of New York*, 478 F.3d 76, 93 n.19 (2d Cir. 2007); *see also Emerson v. City of New York*, 740 F. Supp. 2d 385, 396 (S.D.N.Y. 2010) (“[A] plaintiff is generally prohibited from suing a municipal agency.”). Plaintiff’s claims against DOC and Rikers Island are dismissed for failure to state a claim on which relief may be granted.

2. New York City

When a plaintiff sues a municipality under § 1983, it is not enough for the plaintiff to allege that one of the municipality’s employees or agents engaged in some wrongdoing. The plaintiff must show that the municipality itself caused the violation of the plaintiff’s rights. *See Connick v. Thompson*, 131 S. Ct. 1350, 1359 (2011) (“A municipality or other local government may be liable under this section [1983] if the governmental body itself ‘subjects’ a person to a deprivation of rights or ‘causes’ a person ‘to be subjected’ to such deprivation.”) (quoting *Monell v. Dep’t of Soc. Servs. of City of New York*, 436 U.S. 658, 692 (1978)); *Cash v. Cnty. of Erie*, 654 F.3d 324, 333 (2d Cir. 2011). In other words, to state a § 1983 claim against a municipality, the plaintiff must allege facts showing (1) the existence of a municipal policy, custom, or practice, and (2) that the policy, custom, or practice caused the violation of the plaintiff’s constitutional rights. *See Jones v. Town of East Haven*, 691 F.3d 72, 80 (2d Cir. 2012); *Bd. of Cnty. Comm’rs of Bryan Cnty. v. Brown*, 520 U.S. 397, 403 (1997) (internal citations omitted).

Plaintiff does not provide facts suggesting that a municipal policy, custom, or practice played a role in the events giving rise to this complaint. The Court therefore dismisses without prejudice Plaintiff’s claim against New York City and grants Plaintiff leave to amend his claim to provide any facts in support of his claim against New York City.

LEAVE TO AMEND

Plaintiff proceeds in this matter without the benefit of an attorney. District courts generally should grant a self-represented plaintiff an opportunity to amend a complaint to cure its defects, unless amendment would be futile. *See Hill v. Curcione*, 657 F.3d 116, 123-24 (2d Cir. 2011); *Salahuddin v. Cuomo*, 861 F.2d 40, 42 (2d Cir. 1988). Indeed, the Second Circuit has cautioned that district courts “should not dismiss [a *pro se* complaint] without granting leave to amend at least once when a liberal reading of the complaint gives any indication that a valid claim might be stated.” *Cuoco v. Moritsugu*, 222 F.3d 99, 112 (2d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Gomez v. USAA Fed. Sav. Bank*, 171 F.3d 794, 795 (2d Cir. 1999)). Because Plaintiff may be able to allege additional facts to state a valid claim, the Court grants Plaintiff 60 days’ leave to amend his complaint to detail his claims.

Plaintiff is granted leave to amend his complaint to provide more facts about his claims. First, Plaintiff must name as the defendants in the caption⁴ and in the statement of claim those individuals who were allegedly involved in the deprivation of his federal rights. If Plaintiff does not know the name of a defendant, he may refer to that individual as “John Doe” or “Jane Doe” in both the caption and the body of the amended complaint.⁵ The naming of John Doe defendants, however, does *not* toll the three-year statute of limitations period governing this action and Plaintiff shall be responsible for ascertaining the true identity of any “John Doe” defendants and amending his complaint to include the identity of any “John Doe” defendants

⁴ The caption is located on the front page of the complaint. Each individual defendant must be named in the caption. Plaintiff may attach additional pages if there is not enough space to list all of the defendants in the caption. If Plaintiff needs to attach an additional page to list all defendants, he should write “see attached list” on the first page of the Amended Complaint. Any defendants named in the caption must also be discussed in Plaintiff’s statement of claim.

⁵ For example, a defendant may be identified as: “Correction Officer John Doe #1 on duty August 31, 2010, at Sullivan Correctional Facility, during the 7-3 p.m. shift.”

before the statute of limitations period expires. Should Plaintiff seek to add a new claim or party after the statute of limitations period has expired, he must meet the requirements of Rule 15(c) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. In the “Statement of Claim” section of the amended complaint form, Plaintiff must provide a short and plain statement of the relevant facts supporting each claim against each defendant. If Plaintiff has an address for any named defendant, Plaintiff must provide it. Plaintiff should include all of the information in the amended complaint that Plaintiff wants the Court to consider in deciding whether the amended complaint states a claim for relief. That information should include:

- a) the names and titles of all relevant people;
- b) a description of all relevant events, including what each defendant did or failed to do, the approximate date and time of each event, and the general location where each event occurred;
- c) a description of the injuries Plaintiff suffered; and
- d) the relief Plaintiff seeks, such as money damages, injunctive relief, or declaratory relief.

Essentially, Plaintiff’s amended complaint should tell the Court: who violated his federally protected rights and how; when and where such violations occurred; and why Plaintiff is entitled to relief.

Because Plaintiff’s amended complaint will completely replace, not supplement, the original complaint, any facts or claims that Plaintiff wants to include from the original complaint must be repeated in the amended complaint.

CONCLUSION

Plaintiff is granted leave to file an amended complaint that complies with the standards set forth above. Plaintiff must submit the amended complaint to this Court’s Pro Se Intake Unit within sixty days of the date of this order, caption the document as an “Amended Complaint,”

and label the document with docket number 21-CV-9760 (LTS). An Amended Civil Rights Complaint form is attached to this order. No summons will issue at this time. If Plaintiff fails to comply within the time allowed, and he cannot show good cause to excuse such failure, the complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *Cf. Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962) (holding that an appellant demonstrates good faith when he seeks review of a nonfrivolous issue).

The Clerk of Court is directed to mail a copy of this order to Plaintiff and note service on the docket.

SO ORDERED.

Dated: December 6, 2021
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN
Chief United States District Judge

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

Write the full name of each plaintiff.

____ CV ____
(Include case number if one has been assigned)

-against-

COMPLAINT
(Prisoner)

Do you want a jury trial?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Write the full name of each defendant. If you cannot fit the names of all of the defendants in the space provided, please write "see attached" in the space above and attach an additional sheet of paper with the full list of names. The names listed above must be identical to those contained in Section IV.

NOTICE

The public can access electronic court files. For privacy and security reasons, papers filed with the court should therefore *not* contain: an individual's full social security number or full birth date; the full name of a person known to be a minor; or a complete financial account number. A filing may include *only*: the last four digits of a social security number; the year of an individual's birth; a minor's initials; and the last four digits of a financial account number. See Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2.

I. LEGAL BASIS FOR CLAIM

State below the federal legal basis for your claim, if known. This form is designed primarily for prisoners challenging the constitutionality of their conditions of confinement; those claims are often brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (against state, county, or municipal defendants) or in a “*Bivens*” action (against federal defendants).

☐ Violation of my federal constitutional rights

☐ Other: _____

II. PLAINTIFF INFORMATION

Each plaintiff must provide the following information. Attach additional pages if necessary.

| First Name | Middle Initial | Last Name |
|------------|----------------|-----------|
|------------|----------------|-----------|

State any other names (or different forms of your name) you have ever used, including any name you have used in previously filing a lawsuit.

Prisoner ID # (if you have previously been in another agency’s custody, please specify each agency and the ID number (such as your DIN or NYSID) under which you were held)

Current Place of Detention

Institutional Address

| County, City | State | Zip Code |
|--------------|-------|----------|
|--------------|-------|----------|

III. PRISONER STATUS

Indicate below whether you are a prisoner or other confined person:

☐ Pretrial detainee

☐ Civilly committed detainee

☐ Immigration detainee

☐ Convicted and sentenced prisoner

☐ Other: _____

IV. DEFENDANT INFORMATION

To the best of your ability, provide the following information for each defendant. If the correct information is not provided, it could delay or prevent service of the complaint on the defendant. Make sure that the defendants listed below are identical to those listed in the caption. Attach additional pages as necessary.

Defendant 1:

| | | |
|--|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | Shield # |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 2:

| | | |
|--|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | Shield # |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 3:

| | | |
|--|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | Shield # |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 4:

| | | |
|--|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | Shield # |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

V. STATEMENT OF CLAIM

Place(s) of occurrence: _____

Date(s) of occurrence: _____

FACTS:

State here briefly the FACTS that support your case. Describe what happened, how you were harmed, and how each defendant was personally involved in the alleged wrongful actions. Attach additional pages as necessary.

[illegible]

INJURIES:

If you were injured as a result of these actions, describe your injuries and what medical treatment, if any, you required and received.

VI. RELIEF

State briefly what money damages or other relief you want the court to order.

VII. PLAINTIFF'S CERTIFICATION AND WARNINGS

By signing below, I certify to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief that: (1) the complaint is not being presented for an improper purpose (such as to harass, cause unnecessary delay, or needlessly increase the cost of litigation); (2) the claims are supported by existing law or by a nonfrivolous argument to change existing law; (3) the factual contentions have evidentiary support or, if specifically so identified, will likely have evidentiary support after a reasonable opportunity for further investigation or discovery; and (4) the complaint otherwise complies with the requirements of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11.

I understand that if I file three or more cases while I am a prisoner that are dismissed as frivolous, malicious, or for failure to state a claim, I may be denied *in forma pauperis* status in future cases.

I also understand that prisoners must exhaust administrative procedures before filing an action in federal court about prison conditions, 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(a), and that my case may be dismissed if I have not exhausted administrative remedies as required.

I agree to provide the Clerk's Office with any changes to my address. I understand that my failure to keep a current address on file with the Clerk's Office may result in the dismissal of my case.

Each Plaintiff must sign and date the complaint. Attach additional pages if necessary. If seeking to proceed without prepayment of fees, each plaintiff must also submit an IFP application.

| | |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| Dated | Plaintiff's Signature |
| First Name | Middle Initial |
| | Last Name |
| Prison Address | |
| | |
| County, City | State |
| | Zip Code |

Date on which I am delivering this complaint to prison authorities for mailing: _____